

AMERICAN BAPTISTS AND HOMOSEXUALITY

October 17, 1999 (Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, wayoflife.org, fbns@wayoflife.org) - The following article by Matt Costella is from Foundation magazine July-August 1999 [Fundamental Evangelistic Association, P.O. Box 6278, Los Osos, CA 93412. 805-528-3534 (voice), 805-528-4941 (fax), fea1928@aol.com (e-mail), <http://www.tcsn.net/fbchurch> (web site)]--

Despite the uplifting theme of the 1999 biennial convention, "Turning to Jesus, Renewed for Mission," the American Baptist Churches USA recently became aware that it is not immune from the controversies concerning the full inclusion of homosexuals and lesbians within its own denomination. While the issue of homosexuality has plagued other mainline denominations for many years, it seems that this issue has reached a climax at this point in history for the American Baptists. The recent biennial meeting of the 1.5-million member denomination proved to be both informative and controversial. For the first time in many years, division over the issue of homosexuality threatens the ABC/USA. However, liberalism and compromise are nothing new to this denomination. The American Baptists, for many years, have embraced and heralded the social gospel clothed in the garment of liberal politics, boasted of their ecumenical theology and drive for visible unity with all denominations and ordained and supported women ministers. The following report will briefly describe how liberalism once again manifested itself at this year's biennial convention.

HOMOSEXUALITY

Three days before the biennial convention had even begun, controversy concerning the ABC/USA's toleration of homosexuality erupted following a vote by the general board to dismiss four churches that had become members of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists (AWAB) and to retain one other church that had also done the same. This is how the controversy began:

- * Two American Baptist regional bodies (the American Baptist Churches of the West and the American Baptist Churches of Ohio) admonished certain churches within their respective fellowships to cease membership from the AWAB, an organization that promotes the full inclusion of gay, lesbian and bisexual persons in all areas of ABC/USA ministry.
- * The five churches, four from the ABC of the West and one from the ABC of Ohio, disregarded the admonition.
- * Because all member churches of the ABC/USA must minimally adhere to five criteria for membership, the first of which is to "accept and publicize the purpose statement of American Baptist Churches in the USA and of the regional mission organization in which the church is located," and because the purpose statement of the ABC/USA specifically declares that members are to "receive from one another mutual counsel and correction," the two regional associations disfellowshipped the five churches from the ABC for disregarding the counsel of the other churches that were within those regional associations.
- * The five disfellowshipped churches appealed to the general board of the ABC/USA national body, which met a few days prior to the national biennial convention in Des Moines. While the individual churches could not become members of their regional bodies once again, ABC/USA policy allows individual churches to appeal to the general board to be reinstated as members of the ABC/USA national body.

The general board narrowly voted to reject the appeals of the four California churches and to accept the appeal of the one Ohio church. Therefore, the four California churches were

completely disfellowshipped from the ABC/USA while the one Ohio church was permitted to maintain national membership status.

A MIXED MULTITUDE

The decision of the general board brought waves of controversy throughout the convention. Some claimed that the general board and the regional associations were interfering with the autonomy of the local churches (all Baptist groups uphold the autonomy of the local church as a matter of Baptist polity). Others claimed the general board was setting an anti-homosexual precedent by ousting four churches and retaining only one into the national body. Still others, convinced that homosexuality is incompatible with Bible doctrine, applauded the vote. In a press conference, Dr. Daniel Weiss, general secretary of the ABC/USA, commented on the general board's decision by saying the close vote reflects the attitude of society as a whole concerning the matter of homosexuality. "People are split over this particular issue," he said. "But I think it is very important to recognize that THIS [VOTE] REALLY IS NOT INTENDED TO BE A REFERENDUM ON HOMOSEXUALITY." Weiss, the highest ranking official in the ABC denomination, added:

'We have a continuum opinion on the issue of homosexuality within the American Baptist Churches that ranges all the way from those who believe that its practice is condemned in Scripture and is a sin, to persons on the other end of the continuum who believe that monogamous same-sex relationships are not known in the Bible, they are not addressed in the Bible, and the kind of homosexuality we have today (monogamous) is really not addressed, and the passages adduced to condemn them are misunderstood, so that we have differences of opinion as to what the passages in Scripture mean around this issue.'

WEISS UNAPOLOGETICALLY ADMITTED THAT THE ABC/USA CONDEMNS NEITHER THOSE WHO OPPOSE HOMOSEXUALITY NOR THOSE WHO ENDORSE OR EMBRACE SUCH BEHAVIOR.

The AWAB (which currently boasts membership of 30 ABC/USA churches and organizations) and the American Baptists Concerned for Sexual Minorities are both special interest groups working for the full inclusion and acceptance of homosexual, bisexual and lesbian persons within the ABC/USA. The American Baptists Concerned for Sexual Minorities describes itself as a "diverse" organization, according to one brochure available at the convention. The brochure, published by the American Baptists Concerned, says, "We are women and men, sexual minority and heterosexual. We are found in the pulpits and in the pews in active support of ABC churches throughout the country." The purpose of the group is then specifically stated as follows: "To unite sexual minority people and their families and friends within the ABC/USA for mutual assistance, education, support and communication. To this end we cooperate with other ABC groups, as well as groups affiliated with other denominations, in tasks of mutual interest."

During the week, the AWAB sponsored "A Service of Celebration and Affirmation" at a local Lutheran church. During this worship service, as throughout the entire convention, the lesbian/gay activists mourned the loss of the four disfellowshipped churches from the ABC/USA and lashed out at the general board for its decision. Those who spoke at the service called upon all American Baptists to protest the decision of the general board. The worship service included a public recitation of an inclusive-language translation of "The Lord's Prayer" ("Our Creator, who art in heaven..."); a song describing God as "strong mother God," "warm father God," "old, aching God" and "young, growing God" in which the author of the song stated that "the aspects of the divine are revealed in our maleness, our femaleness, youth, and age in a moving, growing matrix of life in God"; a prayer of affirmation in which the speaker attempted to justify homosexual and lesbian behavior by stating, "We celebrate and affirm, O God, that which you affirmed from the beginning, that all creation is good, that we are good..."; and, finally, a sermon by Timothy Phillips, a homosexual ABC minister from University Baptist Church in Seattle, Washington, who

characterized Jesus as a revolutionary who fought against the religious tradition of His time and equated such religious tradition with those today who oppose homosexuality.

During the biennial, the AWAB made available a booklet entitled "Homosexuality and the Bible" by Dr. Walter Wink (a luncheon speaker at the convention). In his booklet, Wink says the laws of the Old Testament which condemn homosexuality are only one set of laws among many that are not in effect today, and he harmonizes this statement with Paul's words against homosexuality in Romans by adding, "Paul believed that everyone was straight. He had no concept of homosexual orientation. The idea was not available in his world." His booklet also states, "Paul knew nothing of the modern psychosexual understanding of homosexuals as persons whose orientation is fixed early in life, or perhaps even genetically in some cases." WINK SAYS THE BIBLE CONTAINS NO "SEX ETHIC" and discusses his own idea of the Bible's "love ethic" as revealed in the person of Jesus. He notes, "With the interpretive grid ... we are able to filter out the sexism, patriarchalism, violence, and homophobia that are very much a part of the Bible, thus liberating it to reveal to us in fresh ways the inbreaking, in our time, of God's domination-free order."

Despite the strong presence of pro-homosexual/lesbian delegates and visitors at the biennial, NO SCHEDULED SPEAKER DURING ANY PLENARY SESSION ADDRESSED THE NEED TO SEPARATE FROM SUCH SINFUL BEHAVIOR. In fact, almost every plenary speaker at the convention, as well as the general secretary, CALLED UPON ALL MEMBERS OF THE ABC/USA TO UNITE AROUND THEIR COMMON BELIEFS RATHER THAN DIVIDE OVER THEIR "DIFFERENCES OF INTERPRETATION" concerning what the Bible says about homosexuality. For example, the Reverend Liliana DaValle, a plenary speaker at the biennial and an ABC/ USA minister from Massachusetts, said the ABC/USA needs to put controversies, tradition and humanity aside in order to sit at the feet of Jesus. "We are a family, and we need to put to rest our controversies," she said. "If we American Baptists put away our controversies we will have no one to fight with." She added, "Perhaps we're being confused, mistaking our brother or sister who confesses Jesus Christ as our enemy."

On another occasion, General Secretary Daniel Weiss told the denomination that it is faced with two mutually exclusive alternatives: "We can turn to Jesus, or we can turn on each other," he said. "And we can't have a little of each. If we truly turn to Jesus, it will so preoccupy us that we will have little inclination or opportunity to turn on each other." Weiss stated six conditions that must be met in order for the future of the ABC/USA to be "bright," one of which is as follows (three others to be discussed later):

"The future is bright if we are willing to accept the diversity God gives us."

Weiss noted that theological diversity is perhaps the most challenging form of diversity present within the denomination. "WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN A THEOLOGICALLY DIVERSE PEOPLE," he said, noting that every individual holds a hierarchy of theological values which he hopes "is determined by the priorities and values assigned by Scripture." Weiss added,

My guess is that if we sat down together, we would find considerable agreement as to that hierarchy of values. At some points we might disagree. But if we confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in our heart that God has raised Him from the dead, can we agree to disagree? Can we give each other the right to be wrong? There is really no place for "thought police" among us.

National Ministries director Aidsand Wright-Riggins III echoed this call for unity among all individuals within the ABC/USA. At the closing session, Wright-Riggins proclaimed to those in attendance, "WE FIND OURSELVES LIBERAL, CONSERVATIVE, FELLOWSHIPED, DISFELLOWSHIPED, YET WE FIND OURSELVES AS ONE."